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Romans in Britain

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The Social and Economic Connotations of the Relationship Between Domestic Architecture and the Natural World

The modes with which both Iron Age and Roman domestic architecture engaged with the surrounding land is more similar than one would initially think. However, there are key differences which indicate the social and economic change Britain went through over time. Rural settlements from both periods were deeply entwined with agriculture, however Romans introduced farming at a larger scale with more diversity in order to exploit more resources out of the British natural landscape while Iron Age British settlements practiced subsistence farming in which the production of any form of excess was a manner of expressing social status rather than a necessity in order to supply resources for a growing urbanized colonies. Additionally, as Roman colonies became more economically dominant, the landscape is shaped to consider this with the construction of Roman roads, ultimately revealing the fact that Britain was becoming a Roman society and had adopted both Roman social and economic customs in order to stay afloat during the violent Roman occupation of Britain.

Settlement pattern evidence in Iron Age Britain suggests the average domestic structures, were homesteads enclosed by timber palisades or earthwork such as banks and ditches. These often were big enough to support two or three extended families living together, with some exceptions (Cunliffe 540). The settlement patterns of the domestic architecture found in the west and north of Britain suggest a subsistence agriculture-based society in which family units over

generations resided in the same settlement. This society followed the three-tier structure model consisting of the native Briton elite, their vassals, and then enslaved people. There were multiple types of settlements, the large-scale enclosed settlements such as courtyard houses and cliff castles likely were the homesteads of the elite while their vassals lived in the smaller scale enclosed settlements, such as round houses. Those who inhabited unenclosed settlements were likely the enslaved, such as prisoners of war and criminals. (Cunliffe 259-260) This settlement model of social class being reflected in agriculturally focused homesteads implies that the elite within these societies valued livestock as wealth, while their vassals tended to the land and provided the elite with the cultivated grain in return for their protection. (Cunliffe 259-260) This is further supported by Caesar's account of Britain in *De Bello Gallico*,

The number of the people is countless, and their buildings exceedingly numerous, for the most part very like those of the Gauls: the number of cattle is great. They use either brass or iron rings, determined at a certain weight, as their money. Tin is produced in the midland regions; in the maritime, iron; but the quantity of it is small: they employ brass, which is imported. There, as in Gaul, is timber of every description, except beech and fir. They do not regard it lawful to eat the hare, and the cock, and the goose; they, however, breed them for amusement and pleasure. The climate is more temperate than in Gaul, the colds being less severe. (Caesar Book 5)

The quantity of cattle described, and the recreational breeding of animals not meant to be consumed supports the assertion British society valued livestock as a form of wealth and as a status marker.

An example of a Middle Iron Age settlement is found in the Upper Thames valley, which consists of three distinct geographical zones, the Cotswold flanks, gravel terraces, and the river floodplain. The Cotswold flanks have many enclosed settlements, which are thought to be individual farms which have their own distinct territories, suggesting these settlements typically housed a single-family unit that practiced mixed agriculture and occupied the same site for multiple generations (Cunliffe 228-231). The gravel terraces are surrounded by wetland with evidence of settlement and domestic use on each of the three raised terraces, suggesting that each

served as the homestead for a single family (Cunliffe 231). On the floodplains are the archeological remains of three separate groups of Middle Iron Age dated houses and attached enclosures spaced at intervals of about 50 meters across the meadow, each able to house a single family. These houses would have likely been submerged underwater for the majority of the winter months, suggesting that these were temporary summer homesteads for families who came to the meadows seasonally with their flocks and herds of livestock, after which they would rejoin the settlements on the higher gravel terraces nearby (Cunliffe 231). This further supports the assertion of how entwined the domestic and agricultural was within certain Iron Age British societies as well as the importance of livestock as a signifier of social status within Iron Age British society.

The importation of Roman culture to Britain brought with it the importation of cultural practices which necessitated specific buildings to facilitate them. The seizure of land by Roman colonists, and the military conquest of Britain by Roman forces fundamentally shifted the relationship of native Britons to the land they had inhabited for centuries. The power of land ownership shifted drastically to favor Roman citizens, and in some cases native Britons that had accepted Roman culture or were favored by the Roman elite. However, most Britons were either displaced or made into tenants and had to rent the land which their family had previously inhabited for generations (Mattingly, 353-355). The imposition of Roman systems of land division and ownership altered native Briton's very way of life. Late Iron Age Britain consisted of many societies with diverse systems of governance and varied cultural identities, with the introduction of Roman land divisions the Roman model of governance and understanding of land ownership was imposed upon Britons and forcibly homogenized the relationships Britons had with the land to fit Roman standards and customs (Haselgrove 12-26). This adherence to the

Roman legal system represented the complete military success of the Roman military in seizing the given territories, as inhabitants had no choice but to comply in the face of Rome's military might, if they wanted to continue living in their homeland. However, with the introduction of urbanization the relationship between British domestic architecture and the land changed even more dramatically. Britain had already begun to show signs of urbanization in certain areas after Caesar's initial visits in 55-4 BC, and the adoption of Roman customs by local elites resulted in the development of centralized political authority and a more stratified social structure (Jones 168). Even if the settlements originating from the Iron Age were physically unchanged, in the era of Roman Britain native Britons' relationships with these settlements were fundamentally changed due to the forcible adoption of the Roman legal system in territories which had been seized by Roman forces and were now property of the Roman empire.

While many Roman sources characterize the landscape of Pre-Roman Britain to be undeveloped agriculturally, archeological evidence shows Iron Age Britons had developed agricultural technology similar in caliber to that of Roman society. There were actually many similarities between the landscape of rural agricultural Britain both before and after the Roman conquest as the actual process of farming was largely unchanged. The core techniques with which Britons farmed the land were not completely overhauled or revolutionized, however the scale of production and the diversity of products was improved (Mattingly 366). This is characteristic of the Roman attitude towards the cultivation of foreign lands. Tacitus describes the landscape of Britain upon the arrival of Roman campaign forces in his work the *Agricola*.

With the exception of the olive and vine, and plants which usually grow in warmer climates, the soil will yield, and even abundantly, all ordinary produce. It ripens indeed slowly, but is of rapid growth, the cause in each case being the same, namely, the excessive moisture of the soil and of the atmosphere. Britain contains gold and silver and other metals, as the prize of conquest. The ocean, too, produces pearls, but of a dusky and bluish hue. Some think that those who collect them have not the requisite skill, as in the

Red Sea the living and breathing pearl is torn from the rocks, while in Britain they are gathered just as they are thrown up. I could myself more readily believe that the natural properties of the pearls are in fault than our keenness for gain. (Tacitus Book 12)

Tacitus characterizes the land of Britain as ripe and ready for the taking by Roman forces, this is a common and reoccurring theme in Rome's colonization of other lands. Romans devalued native Britons agricultural ability to justify their desire to exploit the abundant natural resources within Rome and to give reason as to why Britain must be conquered, in order to claim these resources. Additionally, the expansion of scale within agricultural settlements also indicates urbanization. As urbanized city centers did not typically include farmland, rural settlements needed to produce more crops in order to be imported to the city to support the population density of Roman-style cities being constructed in Britain. The introduction of new plants and crops originally from Rome and other colonies conquered by Rome, which had been incorporated into the typical Roman diet, to the landscape is also to accommodate this need as well as a form of Roman cultural dominance through the imposition of Roman cuisine onto Britons. The food of Rome became one of the luxuries with which Romans used to exert cultural dominance onto British societies. Both the production and consumption of food became an avenue for Roman colonization of Britons. Britons cultivating Roman crops in their fields then consequently brought Roman food into their homes and likely cooked Roman meals, and through these ingraining aspects of Roman culture into the minutiae of Briton's lives.

While Roman Britain retained the essence of its agricultural roots, visually it was transformed dramatically. Because of the imposition of Roman land division consequently Roman-style roads were constructed with Roman-style movement in mind, introducing the engineered roads and new bridges and river crossings which shifted the ways in which Britons traversed the landscape. The less technologically developed routes from the Iron Age fell out of use as the centers of commerce travelers needed access to through safe paths became

predominantly Roman (Mattingly 366). With the introduction of these roads, the surrounding landscape was transformed into one that was unmistakably Roman. Travelers were now walking along Roman roads built in accordance with Roman land divisions and surrounded by Roman structures, and the very need for these roads indicated the broader social change in the acceptance of Roman culture into Britain as well as Roman settlements economic dominance. Similarly, while Roman-style villas had similar agricultural associations to the British Iron Age settlements previously discussed, externally they were very different. Villas were rectangular in shape and made use of heavy roofing materials, like tiles and slates, comparatively British Iron Age constructions favored curvilinear shapes and lighter roofing materials, such as thatch (Mattingly 373). Additionally, Roman villas had inextricable ties to the tradition of Roman estates which in turn were tied to “Roman concepts of landownership and tenancy controlled by formal deeds and legal documents” (Mattingly 373) further signaling the embedded adoption of Roman legal practices within British societies and compliance with the Roman occupying force. The construction of this Roman style of domestic structure signaled the acceptance of Roman culture shaping how Britons interacted with space, both inside and outside of the home.

The spaces people inhabit reflect the people who constructed that space, additionally people are influenced by the spaces in which they inhabit. While people are not defined by these spaces completely, they can provide valuable insight into what is valued by a society or individual, as the fact something was created is evidence enough that those who constructed it were invested in something enough to devote their time, resources, and energy to make it a reality. Native British social and economic customs did not die out entirely just because of a Roman presence within Britain, traditional British settlements following the Iron Age standard still existed during and after the Roman Conquest and did not disappear off the face of the earth

because Roman villas and cities were also constructed. The romanization of Britain was irregular and uneven, some British settlements were completely overtaken by Roman culture, while others were untouched, and the large majority existed somewhere in between these two extremes on a spectrum of cultural influence. The shift in how the landscape of Britain was incorporated within rural domestic architecture in Roman Britain however signified the influence of Roman culture on British ways of life and the establishment of Rome as the dominant political entity within Britain which had enough influence to dictate the people's relationship with the landscape.

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